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ABSTRACT

School volunteers come from many sources and provide a wide range of services at both the elementary and secondary levels. Senior citizens have discovered that volunteering offers an avenue for exercising skills and talents gained through a lifetime of experience. In schools across the country, older adults are being brought into classrooms, to the mutual benefit of the schools and the seniors. This digest highlights the value and importance of involving senior citizens in a school volunteer program and provides strategies for program development and implementation. Seven steps to a successful intergenerational program are outlined. These steps are: (1) a needs assessment defining what is to be accomplished; (2) a job description telling volunteers the purpose of the program, what skills are necessary, how much time they must commit, and what is expected of them; (3) recruitment techniques; (4) a screening interview; (5) orientation and training; (6) periodic recognition of volunteer efforts; and (7) an evaluation of whether the goals and objectives of the program have been achieved. Four special issues are discussed briefly: transportation for older volunteers, lunches, liability insurance, and arranging for required tuberculin (TB) skin tests. A list of five organizations and volunteer clearinghouses that can help locate suitable older volunteers is included. (LL)

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Senior Citizens as School Volunteers: New Resources for the Future

Lois Lipson

Introduction

As the National School Volunteer Program (1986) points out, a generation ago the term "school volunteer" meant parent volunteer. Today, school volunteers come from many sources and provide a wide range of services at the primary as well as the secondary levels. While the need for school volunteers has grown, the supply has shrunk because mothers, the major source of traditional school volunteers, have increasingly taken jobs outside the home. Armengol (1992) reports that more and more schools are discovering the wealth of experience and expertise available in their communities' senior populations.

Senior citizens have discovered that volunteering offers an avenue for exercising skills and talents gained through a lifetime of experience (American Association of Retired Persons, 1992). Over 41% of Americans 60 years and older performed some form of volunteer work in 1988, and volunteered an average of 64 days a year (Gallup, 1992). The United States today has more healthy, well-educated, independent, and retired senior citizens than the rest of the world. Between 1900 and 1983, the percentage of the U.S. population aged 65 and above almost tripled (from 4.1 % to 11.7 %) while the number increased more than eight times (from 3.1 to 27.4 million) (National School Volunteer Program [NSVP], 1986). Census Bureau projections indicate persons 65 and older will account for 13% of the population by the turn of the century and by 2030 there will be about 65 million older persons, constituting about 20% of the population.

This Digest highlights the value and importance of involving older volunteers in a school program as well as provides program development strategies.

Benefits to Schools and Seniors

The increasingly expanding older population has a major impact on school districts caught between spiraling costs, declining revenues, and expanding student/faculty need. Attempts to increase school budgets in some districts have gone down to defeat, largely because this older segment of the population often sees no reason to support a system it no longer needs and from which it derives no perceived benefits (Armengol, 1992).

A significant share of school districts' budgets goes for personnel costs. Budget cuts often create a shortage of classroom aides and specialists, who add to the richness of the curriculum and provide vital assistance to overburdened teachers. However, the problem may already contain at least part of its own solution.

In schools across the country, teachers are bringing older volunteers into their classrooms and winning support for school district activities among senior citizens. The Agelink Project, an intergenerational child-care program for school-age children provides after-school services linking children with volunteer older adults in North Carolina (Crites, 1990). The Senior Motivators in Learning and Educational Services (SMILES) program in Salt Lake City recruits and trains older adults and places them in district schools to help with such activities as story reading, field trips, tutoring, arts and crafts, and sports. Many SMILES volunteers work in resource rooms with special education students (Salt Lake City School District, 1992).

Older volunteers can enliven a classroom by offering new and unique perspectives to traditional topics. Experts in crafts and professions share their skills and experiences, and, at the same time, benefit from intergenerational contact with students. An intergenerational program can also fill a personal gap left by the decline of the extended family. According to Armengol (1992) the American family is less enriched now that grandparents are not as likely to be members of a child's household. Senior volunteers often serve as surrogate grandparents. In addition, intergenerational programs can help dispel negative stereotypes that youth and older adults may have about each other (Matters, 1990).

Program Development

Primary responsibility for the development and management of an effective volunteer program rests with the principal or a designated volunteer coordinator. Too often, however, well-meaning administrators impose volunteers on teachers, who feel the burden of yet another task assigned to them. Involving teachers early in the process and at appropriate stages, will help relieve that burden.

Angelis (1990) outlines seven steps to follow in developing a successful intergenerational program: (1) needs assessment, (2) job description, (3) recruitment, (4) screening, (5) orientation and training, (6) recognition, and (7) evaluation.

Needs Assessment. The first step in program development is defining clearly what is to be accomplished and determining student needs. Writing simple goals helps develop a clearer picture of what the program will do and what steps are necessary to make it happen. Key administrators and other decision makers, whose influence and support can make the program successful, should be identified, informed of the project, and involved as much as possible in order to build institutional support.

Job Description. Expected results from the activity must be established and information utilized to make a list of specific tasks volunteers are to perform.

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A job description tells volunteers the purpose of the program, what skills are necessary, how much time they must commit, and what is expected of them.

Recruitment. Those experienced in recruiting volunteers indicate the best method is simply to ask for them. The best technique is personal contact either by telephone or a casual query in conversation. Potential volunteers will usually accept if they are approached by people they know. Examples of contact opportunities include adult education programs at community colleges, retiree organizations, social clubs, and library groups. In a 1988 study of volunteerism in the United States conducted by the Gallup organization, three-fourths of respondents indicated they did not refuse to volunteer when asked. (Gallup, 1988).

Screening. A screening interview will provide an opportunity to evaluate a potential volunteer's background and suitability for the position. After extending a warm welcome and commending candidates for their interest in education, questions should be asked about their special training, education, skills, hobbies, interests, other volunteer experiences, membership in organizations, and, the specific age of students with which they prefer to work. Health, physical limitations, and attitudes towards students should also be ascertained.

Orientation and Training. Orientation sessions should be scheduled throughout the year (Fredericks & Rasinski, 1990). Before a volunteer comes to a classroom for the first time, the teacher should discuss the program with the students. Older volunteers need time to learn how things are done in a new and unfamiliar environment, therefore, it is helpful to supplement the orientation with written materials, tours of the classroom and surrounding areas, and introductions to other teachers and the principal. Preparation of a welcoming event prepared by students will give the volunteers an opportunity to get acquainted.

Recognition. One of the most critical aspects of developing a strong volunteer program is to recognize the importance of volunteers both in private and in public. The volunteer experience carries many rewards, including social contact and feelings of involvement and importance. In many cases, these feelings alone are enough to keep volunteers motivated. Nevertheless, periodic recognition of volunteer efforts is a critical step in maintaining a program.

Evaluation. The success of any volunteer program is gauged with an evaluation of whether the goals and objectives of the program have been achieved. Ideally, these goals and objectives should be cooperatively established by teachers, volunteers, and administrators. As part of this process, teachers need to acknowledge what is going well, what is not going well and, what should be done differently. Positive points should be emphasized, but any problems must also be addressed. Opinions of volunteers, who may have ideas that could make the program more effective, should be sought.

Special Issues

Transportation. Lack of good transportation prevents some older volunteers from participating and keeps others from volunteering as often as they would like. Some report that the cost of bus fare plus lunch is more than their limited incomes will allow. Several programs provide mileage costs, give busfare to volunteers over 60, use school buses, or find transportation from younger volunteers.

Lunches. Principals can sometimes offer lunches to all older school volunteers who are on duty at lunchtime; sometimes the PTA can offer to cover the cost.

Liability Insurance. Some states have laws that provide the same insurance coverage for volunteers as for teachers and other school employees. Some school districts have secured the same arrangement from their insurance companies.

TB Tests. Some school programs make it easier for volunteers to get required tuberculin skin tests by arranging for the community's public health department to do the testing at several schools on different days early in the fall (NSVP, 1986).

Resources

The American Association of Retired Persons (1992) lists the following organizations and volunteer clearinghouses that can help locate suitable volunteers:

The American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) Volunteer Talent Bank was created to help people 50 years of age and older who are interested in volunteering. AARP Volunteer Talent Bank, 601 E Street, N.W., B3-440, Washington, DC 20049.

The Area Agency on Aging is the community focal point for many services for older people and often can help find and place older volunteers. Look in the telephone directory under government listings or contact the Agency on Aging in the state capital.

Family Support Centers at Military Installations offer varied volunteer opportunities.

The Retired Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP) has over 750 local offices. If RSVP is not in the telephone directory, write to RSVP, ACTION Agency, 1100 Vermont Avenue, N.W., Washington, DC 20525.

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References identified with an EJ or ED number have been abstracted and are in the ERIC database. Journal articles (EJ) should be available at most research libraries; documents (ED) are available in ERIC microfiche collections at more than 700 locations. Documents can also be ordered through the ERIC Document Reproduction Service: (800) 443-ERIC.

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